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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CAIRO 002799

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: CAIRO TERROR ATTACK: ARRESTS, CLAIMS, AND REACTIONS

REF: A. CAIRO 2744

[B](#). CAIRO 2743

Classified by A/DCM Michael Corbin for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) In a statement aired on Egyptian TV on the afternoon of April 11, the Ministry of Interior identified the (dead) perpetrator of the April 7 terrorist attack in the Khan el-Khalili tourist bazaar as an 18-year old engineering student from the Delta province of Qalyubia. The announcement contradicted stories sourced to the GOE that ran in the April 11 morning papers, stating that a 23-year old from Giza had been the perpetrator, and that three additional suspects had been arrested. In remarks to the press April 9 (apparently before any arrests were made), Public Prosecutor Maher Abdel Wahed announced that the GOE's investigation indicated that the attack was "an individual act" and confidently asserted that the attack would not have an impact on the tourist industry. Claims of responsibility have been put forward by two groups, one previously unknown, but it is too early to reach firm conclusions on their credibility. Meanwhile, Egyptian opinion shapers are still digesting news of the attacks. In public commentary, condemnation and criticism has been universal, while the inevitable conspiracy theories are coming to the fore. End summary.

A Perpetrator (and Accomplices?)

[1](#)2. (SBU) At around 1430 local Cairo Time April 11, Egypt State TV carried an official statement by the Ministry of Interior (MOI) which announced the identity of the (dead) bomber who perpetrated the April 7 attack in the Khan el-Khalili bazaar, which left four dead and at least 17 wounded, as 18-year old Hassan Raf'at Ahmad Bashandi, born in the Nile Delta province of Qalyubia and enrolled as a student of engineering at Zagazig University. The MOI statement announced that a police search of Bashandi's home revealed Jihadist propaganda and directions for making improvised explosive devices. The statement claimed positive identification had been made through DNA testing. The statement added that the MOI investigation revealed that the perpetrator's personality had begun to change last summer, following the death of his father, when he began to adopt extremist views, and even attempted to prevent his family from watching television. The statement made no reference to accomplices, but said that further investigations were continuing.

[1](#)3. (C) The MOI's afternoon announcement was in almost complete contradiction to reports carried by the morning papers, sourcing GOE contacts, stating that the GOE had identified the dead bomber as Mohammed Sobhy Aly, a 24 year-old, alternatively reported as hailing from Qalyubia or from the province of Giza. According to a report in the pro-government daily Al-Akhbar, Aly's identity was revealed by a tip from a suspicious family member and confirmed by fingerprint tests. Among the suspected accomplices seized was Aly's brother, Gamal Sobhy Aly, and two others, whose names were not revealed. (Comment: The disparity between the two reports is odd, and suggests either a poorly informed GOE leaker or a willful act of disinformation, though we would be at a loss to explain the motive for the latter. In either case, we take the MOI's mid-afternoon statement as the definitive GOE account, but note that GOE statements to the press, as investigations proceed, can be inconsistent. End comment.)

"An Individual Act"

[1](#)4. (SBU) Earlier, Public Prosecutor Maher Abdel Wahed, Egypt's senior law enforcement official, insisted in remarks to the press on April 9 that the bazaar attack was "an isolated act," and confidently predicted it would "have no impact on tourism." In his remarks to the press Abdel Wahed also warned against "jumping to conclusions," until "all details of the investigation come to light," while (paradoxically) evincing confidence that this was an isolated

act, rather than the work of a larger, organized group. This point, sourced to GOE officials was again stressed in several leading Egyptian papers on the morning of April 11.

Claims of Responsibility

15. (SBU) International Arabic media reported on April 9 two claims of responsibility, one posted on an extremist website by the previously unknown "Islamic Pride Brigades of the Land of the Nile." In its statement, it described the "martyred" perpetrator (without naming him) as one of the "Brigades'" operatives and said the attack was made to protest both the "tyranny" of the Mubarak regime and U.S. policies in the region. The full text of the statement (in Arabic) was subsequently posted on the website of Al-Arabiyya, the Arabic satellite news channel.

16. (SBU) According to various media reports, a second claim of responsibility was issued by the Group "Jund al-Sham," ("Soldiers of the Levant"), a group which some have linked to the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Analysts note Jund al-Sham has claimed virtually every act of terror perpetrated in the Middle East in the past year, including the October 2004 attacks on Israeli tourists in the Sinai, but there is little evidence to link the group with any of these operations. The GOE consistently described both the October 2004 Sinai attacks, and the April 7 incident, as the work of isolated cells of individuals and discounted speculation of linkage between these attacks and wider terror networks.

17. (SBU) Another statement by a terror group, but with a contrasting message, was published by the daily Al-Ahram on April 11. The Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), the terrorist group responsible for numerous attacks in the 1980s and 1990s, whose leaders have since been "tamed" into contrition by the GOE, condemned the April 7 attack. The group's statement, in particularly convoluted language, argues that the April 7 attack "violates Islamic Shari'a," rejects violence against foreigners (and claims EIJ never targeted foreigners), and warns Egypt's Muslim youth to be wise and cautious and not be lured into activities which run counter to the interests of the nation.

Khan Attacks - Egypt Reacts

18. (SBU) While there has been universal criticism and condemnation of the April 7 attacks in the Egyptian media, the inevitable conspiracy theories are beginning to surface in the usual places. Three principal camps are emerging: those blaming the U.S. and Israel, those describing it as a spillover of carnage in Iraq and Palestine, and those speculating about new extremist groups emerging under the nose of the internal security apparatus.

19. (SBU) Quarters like the Muslim Brotherhood, organizers of the weekly demonstration that follows Friday prayers at the Azhar mosque (just a few blocks from the scene of Thursday's attack), and the sensationalist tabloid al-Osboa, are already characterizing the attack as a "U.S.-Israeli operation" aimed at destabilizing Egypt. Ironically, even a leader of the protest group "Enough," quoted in an article in the opposition daily Al-Wafd, accused "certain outside forces" (read the U.S. or Israel) of promoting chaos as part of a plan to impede reform.

110. (SBU) Giving implicit credence to this school of thought, writer Abdullah Kamel invoked the widely discussed remark from Secretary Rice's recent Washington Post interview that she expects instability to continue in the Middle East. This incident, the writer asserted, is evidence that the implementation of "U.S. plans for the region" is beginning. Others, while not pointing the finger at the U.S. or Israel, have openly worried that the GOE will seize on the incident as a pretext to put the brakes on calls to lift the emergency law, a principal demand of the opposition and democratic activists.

111. (SBU) A number of prominent commentators on security affairs, including Di'a Rashwan of the quasi-official Al-Ahram Strategic Studies Center, and retired State Security official Fouad Allam, are describing the attack as a logical extension of instability in other parts of the region like Iraq and Palestine. A third group is speculating worriedly that new, previously unknown Islamist terror groups are emerging and is expressing concern that Egypt's Ministry of Interior has grown lax. These views have been expressed along with criticism of the GOE's rapid assessment of the incident as the work of an isolated individual.

112. (SBU) A number of commentators in the Egyptian media are openly worrying that the April 7 attack could presage a return to the unstable 1990s, when the Islamic Group, the

Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and splinter groups conducted numerous attacks, mainly against foreign tourists, but also against GOE elites, and even secular intellectuals in Cairo, and mounted a serious insurgency in pockets of Upper Egypt provinces such as Sohag and Assiyut. There has been speculation, in papers such as the tabloid Sawt al-Umma, that a period of laxity on the part of internal security forces has allowed new terror groups (perhaps such as the "Islamic Pride Brigades") to emerge.

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